

Real and virtual worlds, an autistic perspective



Introduction



- The positive impacts of screens
- The negative impacts of screens
- Assessing the situation
- Helping the autistic person



The positive impacts of screens

- Compensate for deficits
- Security feeling
- Learn to socialize
- Knowledge and skills
- Pleasure and relaxation



Compensate for cognitive deficits

- Operating memory
- Planning and organization
- Orientation in time or space
- Transitions
- Attention
- Problem solving
- Control and regulation of emotions
- Other executive functions
- "Dys" disorders

- To make calculations
- To check spelling
- Tasks and appointments
- Visualize the passage of time
- Step by step video tutorials
- Planners
- Support forums
- Development of capacities
- Making mistakes without serious consequences



Compensate for communication and interaction deficits

- Alternative and augmentative communication (**AAC**):
pictograms, tables, sign languages, chat, decision trees, mind maps, video extracts, etc.
- No language: diagrams, videos, etc.
- Facilitate social interactions



Screens provide a sense of security

- ▼ sensory discomfort
- ▼ insecurity (cognitive deficits)
- Compatible peoples



Mitigate discomfort related to sensory abnormalities

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| • Sight | • Balance |
| • Hearing | • Thermoception |
| • Smell | • Pain |
| • Taste | • Thirst and hunger |
| • Touch | • Bladder and intestines |
| • Proprioception | |

Sensory cocktail for each sense:

- Hyposensitivity
- Hypersensitivity
- Synesthesia
- White noise



Alleviate insecurity caused by cognitive deficits

- Concrete thinking
- Detailed perception
- Analyzing the whole situation consciously before making sense
- Not reacting in real time
- Perpetual danger
- ► Interaction scripts



Make it easier to find compatible people

- Unusual interests
- Humans = aversion to strangeness
 - ► fear, disgust or hatred
 - ► rejection
- Similar people



Respond to knowledge and skill needs

- Feel competent
- Understand and know
- feel competent
- Understand and know
- "Insufficient", "incompetent" and "ignorant"...
- Game = recognized and valued skills and knowledge
- Digital literacy, career or volunteering in virtual environments



Procurent plaisir et détente

- Happy or relaxing
- + tensions ► need for + relaxing moments moments
- Physical, psychological and emotional tensions
- ▼ frequency, duration et intensity of autistic meltdowns and shutdowns



The negative impacts of screens

- Physical or sensory fatigue
- Running away from reality on the screens
- Developing an addiction



Risk of cognitive, physical or sensory exhaustion

- If solicits hypersensitivity
- Sensory overload ► physical exhaustion
- Limit sleep time
- If solicits an impaired cognitive faculty
- Do not perceive exhaustion
- Breakpoint?



Risk of running away from reality on screens

- Exhausting and painful relationship with the physical or human environment
- Virtual environment = only one which is bearable



Assessing the situation

- The distinctive attachment style of some autistic people
- Addiction or adaptive strategy?
- The needs and expectations of the autistic person
- The needs and expectations of the loved ones



1. The distinctive attachment style of some autistic people

- If parents are neurotypical
- If needs aren't perceived and understood ► not responded to quickly and adequately
- Inadequate response perceived as aggression
- No response ► perceived as abandonment
- Problematic or non-existent attachment "people assigned to my care"
- Relationships with humans = no benefit and potential danger



2. Addiction or adaptive strategy?

- Do you really know addiction?
- Are you trained to differentiate it from the coping strategies of autistic people?



Addiction or adaptive strategy?

- *Addiction*: A condition characterized by the use of a substance or behavior in order to obtain something highly desirable, despite the harmful consequences of continuing. Addiction to feelings of pleasure, power, controlled risk, etc.
- *Adaptive strategy*: Means to compensate for one's deficits, limit one's autistic breakdowns, finally feel competent, socialize with compatible people, learn and develop skills, feel a moment of security, etc.



Vérifier les causes des comportements observés

- Don't attribute your neurotypical intentions, always check with the person!
- Sensory perceptions, cognitive style, perception of reality, values...
- Video game = stereotypes used to release tension
- Video game = predictable, logical, clear rules (cognitive)
- Ability to adjust the virtual (sensory) environment
- Psychological defense mechanisms + cognitive escape (rest) + sensory escape (well-being)



Check the psychological state

- Absence of future ► absence of hope
- Fleeing a world that offers nothing to autistic people
- Distress (painful environment, unbearable continuously)
- Remove access to game ► will search for another solution to distress and pain



Drawing conclusions

- Playing video games isn't inherently bad
- Source of reassurance in a chaotic world
- Moment of relaxation: clear rules, understandable and fixed consequences
- The virtual should not be the only strategy available to protect yourself
- Variety of solutions, strategies and accommodations, in each location/situation



3. The needs and expectations of the autistic person

- Need of the autistic person or need of parent/caregiver?
- Know the person: ambitions, dreams, desires, plans, interests, values, MEANING to their life
- Autistic-chameleons: fragmented in characters, disconnected from Self
- Real need or defense mechanism in the face of years of suffering?
- Belief that any relationship will be negative or dangerous? (you would think that too if you had suffered the same violence, social exclusion and other abuses all your life)



Our non-standard development

- Slower socio-emotional maturation for some
- Tension ► use of psychological defense mechanisms
- Insufficient resources, inappropriate advice, poorly trained and insufficiently experienced professionals ► impatient, irritable, exhausted, anxious, discouraged, helpless parents



The risks of attributing intentions to the autistic person

- CHECK MOTIVATIONS!!!

- Believe the person

- Carl Rogers:

The organism responds to the perceptual field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is "the reality" for the individual.



4. The needs and expectations of the loved ones

- Parents in $1+1=1$ relationship with their autistic child
- Projects their needs onto son or daughter
- Needs of the loved one \neq needs of the autistic person



Helping the autistic person

- Inform, explain and standardize
- Make the real world tolerable if not pleasant
- Make the real world safe and secure



Inform, explain and standardize

- Normalize difficulties
- Identify irritants and find solutions
- Explain that their parent isn't mean, just ignorant



Normalize difficulties

- Normalize difficulties, but not deny them
- ~~"We all have difficulties in life"~~
- The autistic person really has more difficulties to overcome
- Fear of failure in the real world (too chaotic and unpredictable):
 - Expose him to situations according to his abilities and skills
 - Failure \neq stupidity or worthlessness
 - Failure = step in the learning process³
 - Experience and skill more important than short term success or failure



Identify irritants and find solutions

- List of irritants and disagreements with loved ones
- Compromise, but never if interferes with a deficit or with a sensory abnormality
- Never require the autistic person to endure pain (sensory, physical) or unbearable stress (eg cognitive overload) in order to relate. How could he then perceive relationships positively?
- Helping loved ones to do their share (inform, train, support)
- Assess if this is a "non-problem" (Is it really necessary?)
- Evaluate alternatives (eg bath instead of shower), be creative!



Explain that his parent isn't mean, just ignorant

- Important to explain:
 - The peculiarity of raising an autistic child for an NT parent.
 - The complex grieving of his dreams of all the things he was expecting doing with his son or daughter.
 - Difficulty in theory of mind and empathy towards one's child, due to different cognitive style, sensory abnormalities, etc. Google: "double empathy problem"
- Illustrate situations where the autistic person was also unable to put themselves in the shoes of an NT person. That doesn't make him a mean person, just someone who doesn't know what it is to be NT.
- Never demand more from the autistic person than from their parents, teachers or caregivers!
- Ability to understand according to actual stage of development (\neq chronological age)



Make the real world tolerable if not pleasant

- Mitigating hypersensitivities and hyposensitivities
- Medication, psychotherapy and other therapies
- ▼ stress related to cognitive deficits



Mitigating hypersensitivities and hyposensitivities

- MYTH: ~~Exposure will eliminate hypersensitivity.~~
- REALITY: Exposure will reinforce the belief that the real world is a source of suffering and that the people who claim to want to help you actually enjoy torturing you!
- Assess sensory abnormalities (occupational therapist)
- Find solutions and try them
- Spending time with an autistic adult, he will surely find things that the NT professionals missed.
- Make sure all the person's living environments follow the recommendations and applying the accommodations!



Medication, psychotherapy and other therapies

- No medicine for autism, not a disease. It is a condition.
- Situations where medication can help: debilitating anxiety, incessant and intrusive ruminations, intolerable sensory stimuli despite reduced exposure, depression, insufficient sleep, etc.
- Autistic people are able to develop introspection and self-criticism. Some autistic people have not reached this developmental stage. Help them achieve it!



Mitigating stress related to cognitive deficits

- Incongruences
- Impossibilities
- Orientation in time or space
- Transitions
- Unpredictability
- Lack of structure
- With the autistic person, be logical, direct, explicit, factual and honest
- See Chapter 4 of my book *L'adulte autiste* (free on [Archive.org](https://archive.org))



Making the real world safe and secure

- NT psychology training
- No people with harmful/violent behavior
- No unnecessary stressful situations
- Make the real world more predictable



Training in neurotypical psychology

- No training in NT psychology ► No generalization due to ignorance of the foundations of NT thinking, emotional feelings and expectations
- ~~Social skills workshops~~: a series of examples without substantive explanations are useless for autistic people ► Not generalizing
- Child
- Adolescent
- Adult



Keep people with harmful/violent behaviors away

- Not able to protect ourselves from it without training in NT psychology
- Spend more time in his real environment, when it is full of harmful/dangerous people? And when denounces abuse and violence suffered, we are not believed.
- Spend more time with our loved ones, when our mere presence or existence causes them distress?



Eliminate unnecessary stressful situations

- Effective way ▼ overall level of stress.
- Costs little or nothing. Be creative!
- Simple and fast.
- Check out autistic adults: books, blogs, vlogs, talks, etc.



Make the real world more predictable

- Effective way ▼ overall level of stress.
- Check out autistic adults, local and international groups (Ask Autistic Adults - Resource for Parents of Autistics / 35,000 members).
- Spheres: sensory, social and cognitive.
- ▼ sources of sensory overload
- Do not require spontaneity in interactions and conversations, replace with scripts.
- Use schedules, sequences and routines.
- Concrete and logical explanations, diagrams and visuals, alternative and augmentative forms of communication (AAC).
- Clearly state your needs, expectations and intentions.



Helping loved ones

- Information, training and support
- Find another source of affection and companionship
- Consult in psychotherapy if necessary



Information, formation et accompagnement

- Needing time alone \neq absence d'affection pour ses proches
- Needing time alone \neq sociopathe
- Needing time alone = cognitive and sensory overload, exhaustion
- Needing time alone = need for introspection +++
- Understand and equip yourself to be able to take action
- Be accompanied and supported



Accompaniment helps to take action

- Support groups for parents or spouses
- Well-trained and experienced professionals
- At least one autistic adult
- Support groups by autistic adults



He doesn't necessarily have an oppositional disorder, but...

- Rebuilding trust
- Enjoyable activities together
- Positive discipline
- Don't argue
- Control your negative emotions
- ~~Positive reinforcement~~: Not effective if what is demanded causes distress or pain



Find another source of affection and companionship

- The NT person probably needs more than one person in their life, not just their autistic loved one.
- Help the near NT to find friends and other relations.



Get psychotherapy if necessary

- Real suffering for some loved ones.
- Relatives who need +++ :
 - presence, attention validation;
 - appearance of "normality" of the family or couple.
- Who have erroneous beliefs
- Therapist must be competent in autism, even if he treats the loved one!
- Individual, couple or family therapy.



Conclusion

- Accept other people's differences
- Integrate the person in all spheres
- Mentoring, accommodations, accompaniment, sensory aids, alternative communication, adapted transportation, monetary support, etc.
- Train the person in psychology and neurotypical communication



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